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ABSTRACT

A number of research projects in the field of English education and literacy are beginning to yield findings about both instruction and achievement in a variety of circumstances. Findings across the projects point to three critical components that make a difference in student performance: connections, conversation, and exploration and analysis. This research is carried out by the Center on English Learning and Achievement in classrooms at all grade levels across the United States. Many of the research projects investigate classrooms where students beat the odds--that is, their learning and achievement are higher than that of students in comparable schools elsewhere, even as they face a variety of problems including high poverty levels and large numbers of children learning English as a second language. Common findings indicate that, in the most successful classrooms being studied, teachers constantly make overt connections between the content and skills being taught and used, and things the students already know or have previously studied. Further, across classrooms of excellence, conversation functions as a way for students to think about and learn concepts and broader substantive issues, as well as to gain ways to develop proficiency in the language rules that mark knowing in the particular subject area. Finally, successful classrooms encourage students not just to engage with a topic, but to explore and analyze it, using inquiry and creativity. In classrooms that beat the odds, students have many such opportunities. (SR)

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# Beating the Odds: Critical Components Boost Student Performance.

by Judith Langer

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# English UPDATE

*A Newsletter from the Center on English Learning & Achievement*


# Beating the Odds

## Critical Components Boost Student Performance

by Judith Langer

My colleagues and I at CELA recently completed our second year of data gathering and analysis. Those of you who have been following our work through this newsletter, research reports, conference presentations, on-line discussions, and other communiques know that the CELA research projects presently under way have begun to yield important findings about both instruction and achievement in a variety of circumstances.

The Center's goal is to inform the field of English education and literacy about effective learning and achievement for the diverse students who populate the nation's schools. Many of our projects focus on schools and classrooms where students beat the odds — that is their learning and achievement are higher than that of students in comparable schools elsewhere. These schools face a variety of problems including high levels of student poverty and large numbers of children who are learning English as a second language.

In our efforts to leverage the knowledge gained within each research project and communicate general findings as soon as possible, individual project researchers and Center directors have been meeting to identify common findings that cut across the various bodies of work. At present, findings across the projects point to three critical components that make a difference in student performance: Connections, Conversation, and Exploration and Analysis.

### Connections

In the most successful classrooms we are studying, teachers constantly make connections between the content and skills taught and used not merely within lessons, but also across lessons, topics, and time. Content that is studied at one point in time is always connected to something the students already know or have previously studied, and the connections are overt, so that students are aware of the links they are making.

For example, in literature instruction across the grades, teachers and students inspect features of characterization, plot structure, themes, outcomes, or multiple perspectives not only as they apply to the work being read, but also as they relate to what they have already read as well as to real life in this and other eras and conditions.

When a lesson designed to review a skill begins, the teacher connects it to how it may have helped the students in a previous activity. In this way, skills and their use are connected to a larger context in which they naturally occur and are used. Such lessons are often closed with suggestions for ways in which students might use the skill in forthcoming activities, once again connecting it to its usefulness in a larger literacy activity. Across grade levels, repeated and overt connections make a substantial difference in what students focus on and learn.

In contrast, in more typical classrooms, each lesson tends to be treated in a more isolated fashion, with broader connections left implicit or unaddressed.

### Conversation

Across classrooms of excellence, conversation functions as a way for students to think about and learn concepts and broader substantive issues, as well as to gain ways to develop proficiency in the language rules that mark knowing in the particular subject area. From this perspective, conversation involves using both content and forms of literacy to express knowledge in ways that are understood and valued.

In the most successful classrooms, teachers invite students to engage in substantive oral and written conversations using the specific content and forms of argument appropriate to each discipline. When engaged in substantive discussion, teachers model and encourage students to use such context-specific conversational rules as turn-taking, uptake, explanation, and argumentation that indicate the knowledge and expertise appropriate in that situation. In participating in this way, students gain control not only of the ideas but also of subject-specific and situation-specific vocabulary, grammar, and organization.

Teachers also help students to learn that conversation provides not merely an opportunity to "say" ideas, but an opportunity to share them with others as a way to consider alternatives and reach more well thought through understandings. Thus, across the grades, conversation is used in an expansive sense, as a way for students to gain deeper understandings

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# Beating the Odds

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of the content, while also learning the critical features of vocabulary, syntax, genre, and rhetoric — and when they apply — that mark an educated person.

In more typical classrooms, teachers treat speaking and writing as means to check what students know as opposed to ways to help them think and learn more content and language.

**Exploration and Analysis**

Successful classrooms encourage students not just to engage with a topic, but to explore and analyze it. Such generative learning involves inquiry and creativity — going beyond the given. In classrooms that beat the odds, students have many such opportunities. For example, across the grades students undertake activities for which there is no single or simple solution. Rather, these activities require students to look for new possibilities, including a variety of opportunities to investigate and analyze. The final product is new and more complex understandings.

To stimulate thinking from various perspectives and to encourage the kinds of productive team efforts that are prized in business and industry, teachers often assign activities to groups of students, who hone their individual thinking, investigate possibilities, and develop and examine new ideas with input and feedback from others. Generative learning is also sought in the activities students do on their own. Exploration and analysis is prized as deep understanding, as is the ability to communicate what has been learned.

In more typical classrooms, students are off task more of the time, and engagement with material rather than deeper exploration and analysis is the goal.

Across the classrooms we are studying, which include grade levels from early elementary school to high school and beyond all across the United States, these features stand out as ways to help students beat the odds: Connections, Conversation, and Exploration and Analysis. The next three issues of this newsletter will feature each in greater detail. Please stay tuned.

**English Update**

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